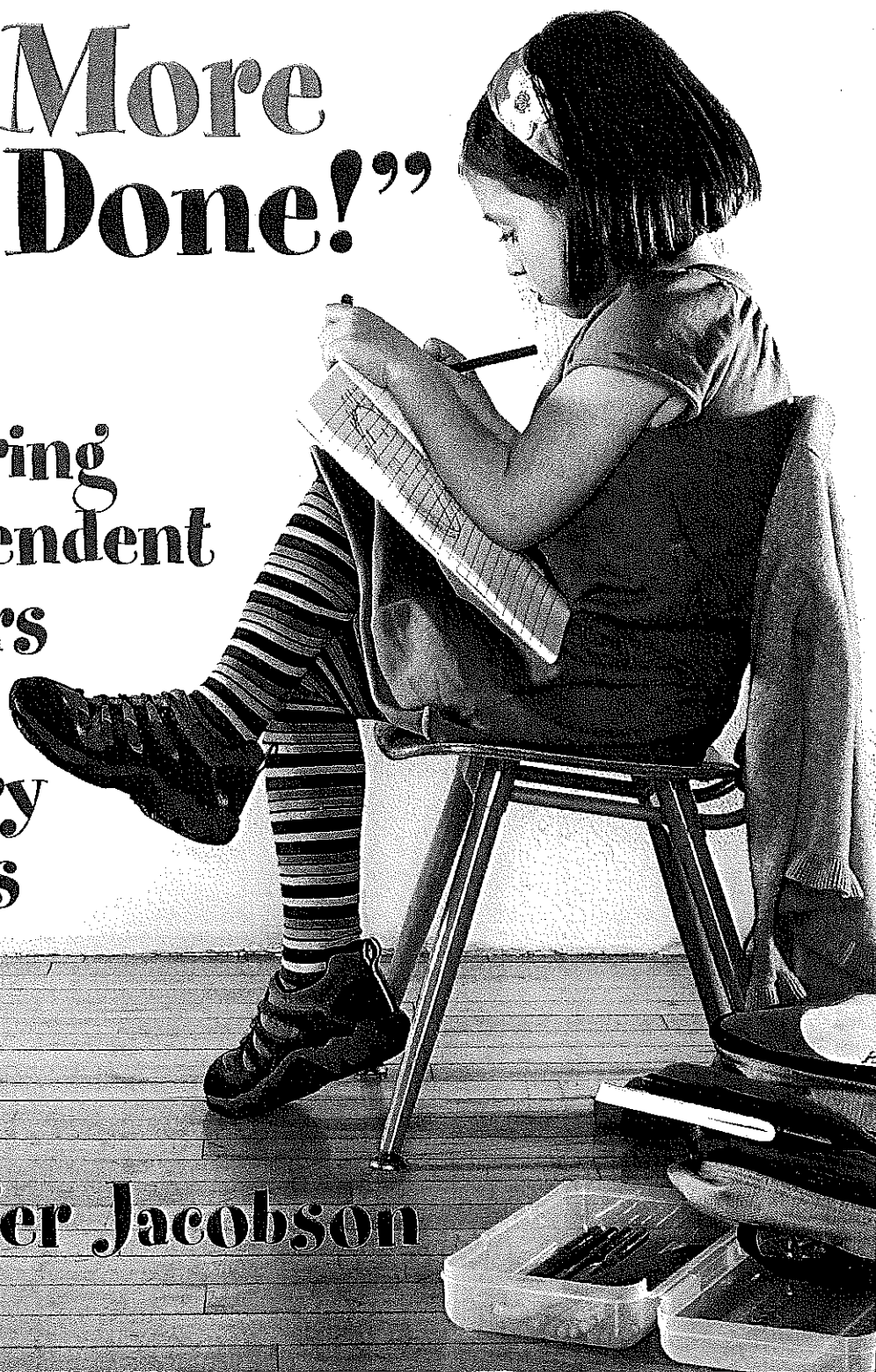


No More “I’m Done!”

Fostering
Independent
Writers
in the
Primary
Grades

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Introduction

In 1986, I accepted a first-grade teaching position in Yarmouth, Maine. I was moving from private school to public and from an administrative position back to the classroom. I knew several things. I knew that I wanted, once again, to be working directly with young children. I knew, having been fired up by the work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Paula Flemming, and others who had piloted writing programs in nearby New Hampshire, that I wanted to establish a daily writer's workshop in my classroom. And I knew that I dreamed of becoming a children's writer.

I told my students on the first day of school that I was going to teach them everything I knew about writing, that I hoped they would teach me everything *they* knew about writing, and that together we'd all grow into the very best writers we could be. I no longer have my own classroom, but I'm still following the course I established on that September day. I embrace the dual identities of writer and teacher.

While trying to break into the children's field, I wrote magazine articles, textbook lessons, teacher resource books, and emergent readers for reading programs. Finally, years after setting my goal, I sold

my first picture book. (And my aforementioned first graders? They were entering high school!) Since that sale, I have published many books for children—from beginning readers to young adult novels. I write, and I observe myself as writer.

As a literacy coach and author-in-residence, I continue to teach writing in the classroom. My students (including many fabulous teachers), teach me. We all grow in new directions.

This combined work has taken me down many wonderful paths of discovery but has in recent years come full circle to focus once again on the development of primary writers. How do we honor the varied developmental stages of our youngest students while teaching necessary skills? When is the appropriate time to introduce writing conventions? And perhaps most importantly (and what this book will aim to address most closely), how can we help primary students become independent writers?

No doubt the teaching of writing can be challenging at any grade, but particularly in the primary years when both skills and attention spans seem to be in short supply. Nevertheless, I've come to believe that primary teachers, with the very best of intentions, inadvertently train their students to be *dependent* rather than *independent* writers. Story starters or writing prompts, fill-in-the blank sentences or waiting until January to begin a writing program (when the students "know their letters") are just a few of the ways we communicate to students that they are not capable of writing and thinking on their own.

"Establishing a community of writers" is a phrase that has been overused, but I still promote the concept. I believe that in the most productive writing environments, the teacher and learner are one. Despite my high expectations for primary students and their ability to choose their own topics, identify and create organizational structures, and hone their language to meet the needs of their audience, I am always surprised by just how far young writers can go.

Two years ago, I was invited to do a weeklong author residency in Cupertino, California. The school is a public magnet school—parents are required to select and support its child-centered philosophy—but it has retained diversity on all fronts. I was in a first-grade room on my initial day, looking over students' shoulders as they wrote. My first glance at a journal frightened me. Edits covered the page: spelling corrections, cross-offs, arrows, insertions. I moved on to the next child and saw the same thing. I couldn't imagine in that moment how this

heavy-handed teacher and I were going to join in our understanding of how children, or anyone for that matter, learn to write.

And then I watched something that astounded me. I watched a six-year-old boy, as he read his own work, pick up a pencil and cross off two whole sentences he had written. He wasn't being nudged by the teacher or a peer editor; he was making assessments about his own writing. The marks on all of these pages were not those of the teacher, but of the students. I learned a lot that week.

More commonly, when visiting classrooms I hear student comments along the lines of "How many sentences do I have to write?" or the premature "I'm done!" Both signal an unnecessary lack of independence and engagement in the writing process.

Teachers postpone student independence for a number of reasons. They claim children lack the necessary knowledge or language skills to write effectively, or that they're at the mercy of standards that require all students to demonstrate specific conventions by December. But I don't think these are the core problems. Supporting independence in writing means a slow but steady release of control—or of teaching practices that help us to believe we're in control. It means allowing students to be in different places: writing about different things at different times while using different materials. It means allowing our students to move through the writing process at their own pace and not in syncopation—never an easy thing to do when you have twenty or more active, curious, slapdash, impulsive students to teach. Nor is it easy to do when you're teaching something as complex as writing.

This book is an invitation for you to examine your own practices, both big and small, that foster independence in writing—especially for emergent writers. Guiding students toward independence takes time and a focus on the goal but is essential for the successful growth of writers at any age.

The book is organized chronologically, from setting up a classroom environment and establishing routines that foster independence to celebrating your students' initiative when they make important decisions around revision. You will find that this is not an offering of assorted ideas to pick and choose from, but a series of practices that build upon one another—each offering the basis for or an integral piece of what's to come. Therefore, I will not only try to present the benefits of each suggestion but also will explain what is lost if the idea

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is rejected so you may substitute or adapt the procedure to meet your own needs.

So turn the page and join me in the process of providing our youngest students with a vision of independence and, even more important, the desire and confidence to achieve it.